A Child's Christmas

and other poems

by Robert Smithdas

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A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS

and other poems

by

ROBERT SMITHDAS

vol. 5

in the series, "There is a Silver Lining"

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The Publishers

"THERE IS A SILVER LINING"

VOLS. I THROUGH V

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ROBERT J. SMITHDAS

counselor to the Community Relations Department
of The Industrial Home for the Blind

Dedication

. . . TO THE MANY THOUGHTFUL FRIENDS
who have made my work, and the work of
The Industrial Home for the Blind, possible.

R. S.

When I was a small boy, we never saw the Christmas tree until the morning of Christmas Day. It came during the mysterious hours of night; and when we saw it in the early grayness of dawn, it stood in a corner of the room, fully dressed with its gleaming decorations. The lights twinkled in a rainbow of color, reflected back by the sparkling radiance of tinsel and bells, and it seemed a continuation of our dreams.

A Child's Christmas

High on a hill a pine-tree grew,
Straight and slender against the sky,
With its proud crest crowned by a star or two,
And its green boughs humming a lullaby.

Until one night, when frost hung white
And flashing fire like diamond chips,
We cut it down by a lantern's light,
And the stars fell out of its rustling tips.

We brought it home while the children dreamed,
And hung it heavy with candle-flame,
And a shower of gilded bells that gleamed
Like a thousand stars till the morning came.

Then we heard the patter of running feet
And a sudden tumult of joyous cries,
As a carol rang out, gay and sweet,
And a Christmas dawn filled all the skies.

On My Thirty-Third Birthday

We are told that everything is created for a purpose, and that everyone has a mission in life. But to appraise ourselves, to analyze our ambitions, to see beyond the present into the dark and unfathomable years of the future, is a gift which few of us will claim to possess. The reasons for our being here are always elusive; we are chained to the present, destined to live within the moment that is NOW.

When I am all alone, and silence spills
Into the hollows of my consciousness,
And the soft weight of darkness seems to press
About me like a cloak that never fills:
I trace the annals of my life's progress,
Light-starved and color-cancelled, lost to sound;
And wonder if, indeed, my soul has found
Its hidden song, the brightness of success?

But then I hear a voice within me chide:
"The sun was dark at noon on Calvary;
And there was silence, even from the birds."
And I reproach myself; and all my pride
Falls from me like a stone, and leaves with me
A sense of comfort, too intense for words.

The Rose of Life

"Every precious moment of life has its pain," wrote one poet; "and if it were not so, we would never value happiness."

This truism is unanswerable and clearly self-evident. For it is only by measuring sorrow against joy, hate against love, and ugliness against beauty, that we come to realize the finer qualities of life.

I love old-fashioned roses with sharp thorns
That let you know that beauty has its pain:
Red roses with the color of the heart,
And petals soft and smooth as Chinese silk,
With small brown daggers hiding underneath.

Love blossoms like a flower as it grows;
But there are moments when the thorns of doubt
Pierce with the sting of anguish and despair.
And then I feel that from the Vine of Life
I've plucked the painful beauty of a rose.

Caribou is hidden away in the mountains of Colorado; it is a town that lived once, built from the glitter of gold. But the mines have tumbled into themselves, and the houses along the single street are weathered and dry and falling into ruins. It will not be too many years before the pines have hidden it, and the memory of it is only in the pages of some dusty history.

Ghost Town

No one recalls who built these leaning walls
And sagging roofs along this mountainside;
Here silence fills the hollows of the hills,
Where once the sound of laughter lived and died.

Broken and blank, the windows, rank on rank,
Stare vacantly into the grass-grown lanes;
No fires light their empty eyes at night,
No friendly faces press against their panes.

Gold built this town that Time has tumbled down —
Its glitter spilled across these crumbling beams;
But when the last bright yellow grain had cast
Its final sparkle, men sought other dreams.

The wind goes by as if it were a sigh;
The sun spins golden coins in the air;
It will not be too long before a tree
Hides each faint mark that Man was ever there.

Retrospect

Memory is the diary of the soul; it contains the vast accumulations of experiences, thoughts and emotions. What we hear and see, what we think and feel — all these are stored away in this elusive faculty of the human mind. The sense of memory is intangible, yet it has the forcefulness of reality in its sudden, unexpected recollections of the past.

I hear with my heart the songs that were familiar
When I was just a child with their music on my lips;
Sad songs and glad songs, that now have fallen silent;
Marching-songs and love-songs, and songs of men and ships.

I see with my soul the seasons changing places,
From the white time of winter to the glossy green of spring;
And the smiles and the laughter of those warm, endearing faces
That made my days of childhood seem such a happy thing.

The weight of the years has buried them like embers,
Hidden deep and glowing in the ashes of the past;
But still they linger on, as my heart and soul remember
The music and the beauty of the years that could not last.

Little Things

Progress begins with small beginnings. A single seed of truth can sprout a whole philosophy, just as a single kernel of corn may grow into the fields that provide strength and prosperity for a fledgling nation for centuries. And most of these small beginnings, in our world of human civilization, had their births in the dreams of their Creators.

An acorn holds a towering oak;
And in a tiny, withered seed
A thousand summer roses sleep;
A wisp of shaggy cloud may hide
The gathered fury of a storm;
And from a single tick of time
A whole eternity is born.

And one man with a consuming dream
Can shake an empire to its roots,
Or dare the splendor of the stars;
Or with one sudden thought, begin
The wisdom of immortal books,
Hew sculptured beauty from rude stone,
Turn silence into deathless song.

In sleep, the mind wanders through a gossamer world of aspirations and desires which seldom — if ever — resolve themselves into realities. Sigmund Freud would undoubtedly have termed them "wish-fulfillments." They occur to all of us; and in the morning, with their passing, we often experience a vague sense of exasperation when we discover that our lives are still as unchanged and unglamorous as ever. But for a few hours, at least, we have lived with Fortune and Ambition and found happiness.

Hero

In dreams I climb Mount Everest,
And plant a banner on its crest;
Or plunge through thrashing, storm-swept waves
To seek drowned gold in coral caves;
Or, borne on flashing wings, I race
Through the bright hinterlands of space.

I've led an army through the world
Until my growing empire curled
Around the globe, from pole to pole.
I've read the secrets of Man's soul;
And, being inordinately wise,
I've read the secrets of the skies.

No hero praised in myth or song
Could ever be so brave and strong
And wise. But when the morning sun
Severs the thread of dreams I've spun,
I wake to find myself once more
As mortal as the day before.

"There is a garden in her face," sang Robert Herrick, an English poet who lived long before the time of Shakespeare. He saw a "garden of beauty" in the smiling countenance of a loved one, just as I have imagined a quiet, picturesque city in the heart of a friend.

City of the Heart

I have been through the gates of an old city,
Girt round by walls of gray and mellow stone,
Whose streets were filled with strong, clear golden light;
The shade of towering trees; and many flowers,
As richly fragrant and as brightly dyed
As I had ever known; and there was music,
Spilled by the wind among the murmuring leaves,
And from the throats of birds whose gay wings brushed
A sky of burnished blue with streaks of song.

I stood beside a lake of crystal waters
That shimmed with the splendor of drowned sun,
And listened to the bells sing Angelus
From the high spires of a white cathedral:
And there was wonder in me, for I had
Never before beheld — nor even dreamed of! —
Such a city, beautiful and serene,
Built from wisdom and with tenderness,
Within the tiny compass of your heart.

Mirror

Looking into a mirror is one of our commonest human experiences; we see our reflections there, and we wonder if we have changed since we last saw ourselves in its shining depths. With unflagging faithfulness, the glass holds every feature in a frozen image, relentlessly portraying every detail.

It has been years since I looked into a mirror; but if I could look into one now, would I recognize myself?

When I was a child, I used to stand
With a broken mirror in my hand,
And watch my laughing image pass
In and out of the shining glass.

It seemed mysterious and strange
To watch the bright, clear surface change,
And behold within a tiny space
A perfect portrait of my face.

If I could hold it here once more,
And look into it as before,
I wonder if I still would see
A faint resemblance of Me?

Fugue

We find it difficult to express the sincerity of the heart, for there are sentiments so utterly overpowering that they exceed the compass of ordinary words. The well-turned phrase does not always come to us when we need it; and often it is not sufficient to measure the intensity of our feelings. We know what we feel, and we are sure that we know what we want to say if only the words would come, but —

Had I the music of heaven and earth,
With its changing tempo of winds and seasons,
And the lilting chorus of singing birds,
And the endless chant of waters moving
Under the lisping leaves of the spring,
I would praise you, dearest, with many voices;
But, having no gift of an angel's tongue,
I play on the muted strings of my heart
With the heavy bow of the sky's loud silence,
And the depthless passion of quiet seas.

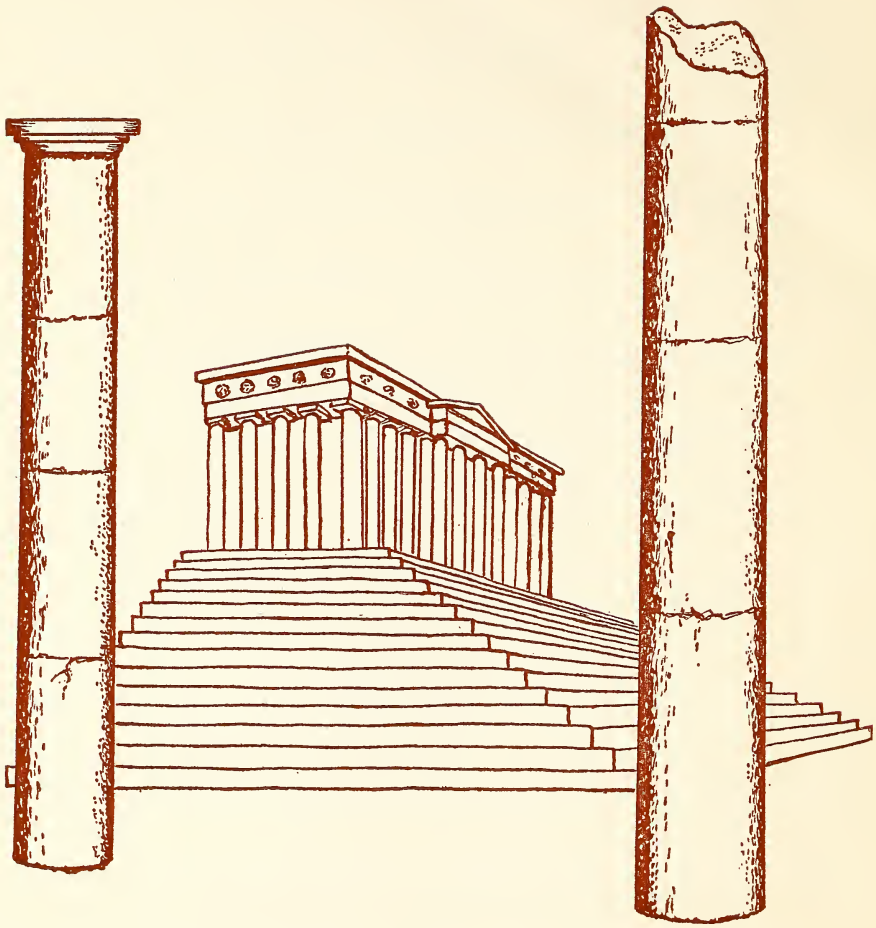
Sometimes — usually for no clearly discernible reason — impressions come to us from the most unaccountable sources. These impressions are extraneous to ourselves, having no apparent meaning; yet they stay with us a long while — often through the course of many years. Why do we remember them?

A Pair of Blue Eyes

I remember seeing, somewhere in a crowd,
A pair of blue and candid smiling eyes,
Filled with bright light, and calm serenity,
And gazing out upon the world of change
With rapture, and the curiousness of life.

They shone like mirrors; and in their depths I saw
Wisdom and kindness, wonder, laughter, love,
As if the soul behind them pressed itself
Against the sunshine of the afternoon
And the warm colors of that day in spring.

I have forgotten dreams of childhood,
And locked so many secrets in my heart,
But always I remember how I saw
Those smiling eyes, so large and luminous,
That twinkled out a life like two blue stars.



Men with great ideas have shaken our world many times, and all the progress of human civilization has stemmed from their ingeniousness. To consider one single advancement of modern life is to think of its beginning in the fertile minds of men who believed in it, and who gave their beliefs the force of conviction and reality.

Dreamers

We built the world's great cities with our dreaming;
For out of our dreams sprang Nineveh and Tyre,
Carthage and Rome, with towers and spires gleaming
Beneath their guardian stars' reflected fire.
We sang beside the streams of Babylon,
And from our throats immortal music poured
Down through lost centuries, and lingered on
While empires fell away with flame and sword.

Heroes were born of us: prophets like Moses;
Poets and scholars, and soldiers of might;
Our dreams of peace are filled with wine and roses,
Our dreams of battle thunder day and night:
And where we pass, our shadows cast their gleams
Into the glory of still greater dreams.

Window Garden

During dark Winter months, when trees stand bare and the colors of summer are only a memory, it is reassuring to find green plants growing on a widow-sill. The sun shines through the frosted panes, weak and cold; but one touches the living, glossy leaves, and it is as if Springtime had made a silent promise of its coming.

Flowers in my window,
All winter long you keep
A hint of Summer's splendor here
While Summer's blossoms sleep.

This is the time of silence,
And all the world is gray;
But I touch your leaves, and know that Spring
Will soon be on its way.

Forecast

Tired of Winter and its long months of desolation and cold, it is not difficult to imagine that the snow-clad trees in a garden are decked with Springtime blossoms. It is a false Spring, with blooms of ice and snow; but it reminds us of the Springs we have known, and fills us with a yearning for the one that waits just around the corner of March.

Yet once again, my apple-trees are drest
Resplendently with blossoms silver-white:
How suddenly they burgeoned overnight
With beauty, when I thought they were at rest.
One day ago, their naked fingers prest
Against a hostile sky of winter light,
As if to touch the waning sun in flight,
Or gather a few embers from the West.

But this new Spring that now enchants each tree
Is strangely cold and gleaming; for these flowers
Were sculped by wind from fallen snow and frost.
And each one holds a coming prophecy
Of brighter suns and laughing April showers,
And the remembered glory of Springs lost.

When the Pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving, it was a day of fasting; we have changed it to one of feasting and good cheer. This is the end of harvest-time, with the crispness of Autumn presaging the bleak cold months of Winter; it is a time of bounty, and a time when the heart garners its gladness for the fruitfulness of the season.

Song of Thanksgiving

I walked through an orchard when Autumn was calling,

Where the breath of the fruit-trees was stronger than wine,

And each toss of the wind sent the golden leaves falling

Like old coins stamped with an ancient design —

And I felt that the spoils of the Summer were mine.

I drank from the wind as one quaffs from a flagon,

And I caught at the leaves with a miser's quick hand,

While my heart sang a song of the harvester's wagon

Heaped high with the wealth of the bountiful land —

With such joy and thanksgiving, no tongue could command.

Water

The composer, Beethoven, used to stand near a basin, listening to the sound of water as it gushed from the tap. It fascinated him, and he would listen to it for hours, often allowing the water to overflow and run over the floor. Water is like quick-silver; it slips through your fingers and is lost, but it is always there — the most important common element of life.

Water, water, I touch you with my fingers,
And you curl round them in a cool caress,
Moulding yourself to every changing gesture
With gentleness.

Water, water, I have found you laughing
In mountain valleys, or where streams run swift;
And I have found you sighing on long beaches
Where white sands drift.

Water of life, that falls in dew and shower,
That sings with many voices in stream and sea,
You hold the miracle of leaf and flower,
And even me.

Falling Asleep

The phenomenon of sleep is still one of the great mysteries of life — we are never conscious of the actual transition from wakefulness to the world of dreams. We close our eyes, and one by one our thoughts slip away into unconsciousness, until our minds become empty and drugged with drowsiness. Then we sink deep into ourselves, till suddenly we are submerged in the strange panoramic world of dreams.

I felt myself falling

Down a chasm wide and deep,

Through darkness and silence

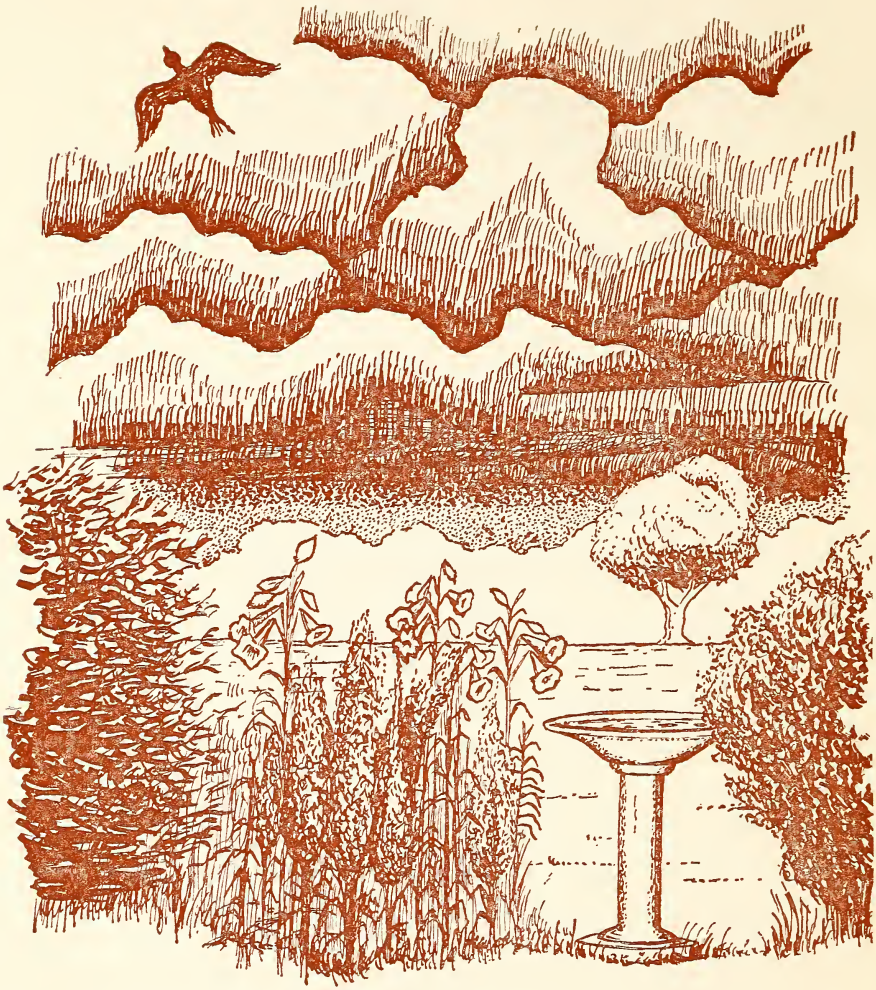
As soft and smooth as silk,

Till I heard birds calling

In a drowsy world of sleep,

And stood with flowers blowing

By fountains white as milk.



As I stood beside the window, looking out into the angry darkness of the storm, my nose barely cleared the window-ledge. I was only four years old; and with a small boy's imagination, I thought that the armies of heaven were locked in battle. Then there was a pause; the thunder died away; and from the far side of the garden came the liquid silver of a bird's song.

Remembered Song

In a lull of a storm I heard
The clear, wild trill of a bird,
Singing alone from a thicket of tall dark trees;
And in the stillness its gallant treble stirred
My heart with a strange peace.

Spontaneously and loud,
It burst through the mist and cloud
Like a sudden pledge of a new and glorious day;
And each courageous note rang strong and proud
Over a world of gray.

Then the thunder rolled again,
And a torrent of wind and rain
Rushed down from the sky, and its song was
lost in the night:
But in my heart the echo of its refrain
Sang on with new delight.

And still it sings through the strife
And the turbulent storms of life,
Through the mists of gloom, and the sorrowful
days I know,
As the bird sang out, with hope as keen as a knife,
So long, long ago.

IN the joyous spirit that is so prevalent at this Christmas time, may we have the privilege of forwarding to you another volume of the lovely poems by Robert Smithdas.

To you and your loved ones we send our best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Peter J. Salmon

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, IHB